One Night of Song

Isaac Asimov

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As it happens, I have a friend who hints, sometimes, that he can call up spirits from the vasty deep.

Or at least one spirit-a tiny one, with strictly limited powers. He talks about it sometimes but only after he has reached his fourth scotch and soda. It's a delicate point of equilibrium-three and he knows nothing about spirits (the supernatural kind); five and he falls asleep.

I thought he had reached the right level that evening, so I said, "Do you remember that spirit of yours, George?"

"Eh?" said George, looking at his drink as though he wondered why that should require remembering.

"Not your drink," I said. "The little spirit about two centimeters high, whom you once told me you had managed to call up from some other place of existence. The one with the paranatural powers."

"Ah," said George. "Azazel. Not his name, of course. Couldn't pronounce his real name, I suppose, but that's what I call him. I remember him."

"Do you use him much?"

"No. Dangerous. It's too dangerous. There's always the temptation to play with power. I'm careful myself; deuced careful. As you know, I have a high standard of ethics. That's why I felt called upon to help a friend once. The damage that did! Dreadful! Doesn't bear thinking of."

"What happened?"

"I suppose I ought to get it off my chest," said George, thoughtfully. "It tends to fester-"

I was a good deal younger then (said George) and in those days women made up an important part of one's life. It seems silly now, looking back on it, but I distinctly remember thinking, back in those days, that it made much difference which woman.

Actually, you reach in the grab bag and whichever comes out, it's much the same, but in those days- I had a friend, Mortenson-Andrew Mortenson. I don't think you know him. I haven't seen much of him myself in recent years.

The point is, he was soppy about a woman, a particular woman. She was an angel, he said. He couldn't live without her. She was the only one in the universe and without her the world was crumbled

bacon bits dipped in axle grease. You know the way lovers talk.

The trouble was she threw him over finally and apparently did so in a particularly cruel manner and without regard for his selfesteem. She had humiliated him thoroughly, taking up with another right in front of him, snapping her fingers under his nostrils and laughing heartlessly at his tears.

I don't mean that literally. I'm just trying to give the impression he gave me. He sat here drinking with me, here in this very room. My heart bled for him and I said,"I'm sorry, Mortenson, but you mustn't take on so. When you stop to think of it clearly, she's only a woman. If you look out in the street, there are lots of them passing by."

He said, bitterly, "I intend a womanless existence from now on, old man-except for my wife, of course, whom, every now and then, I can't avoid. It's just that I'd like to do something in return to this woman."

"To your wife?" I said.

"No, no, why should I like to do something to my wife? I'm talking about doing something for this woman who threw me over so heartlessly."

"Like what?"

"Damned if I know," said he.

"Maybe I can help," I said, for my heart was still bleeding for him."I can make use of a spirit with quite extraordinary powers. A small spirit, of course"-I held my finger and thumb up less than an inch apart so that he was sure to get the idea-"who can only do so much."

I told him about Azazel and, of course, he believed me. I've often noticed that I carry conviction when I tell a tale. Now when you tell a story, old man, the air of disbelief that descends upon the room is thick enough to cut with a chain saw, but it's not that way with me. There's nothing like a reputation for probity and an air of honest directness.

His eyes glittered as I told him. He said could he arrange to give her something that I would ask for.

"If it's presentable, old man. I hope you have nothing in your mind like making her smell bad or having a toad drop out of her mouth when she talks."

"Of course not," he said, revolted. "What do you take me for? She gave me two happy years, on and off, and I want to make an adequate return. You say your spirit has only limited power?"

"He is a small thing," I said, holding up my thumb and forefinger again.

"Could he give her a perfect voice? For a time, anyway. At least for one performance."

"I'll ask him." Mortenson's suggestion sounded the gentlemanly thing to do. His ex-mistress sang cantatas at the local church, if that's the proper term. In those days I had quite an ear for music and would frequently go to these things (taking care to dodge the collection box, of course). I rather enjoyed hearing her sing and the audience seemed to absorb it politely enough. I thought at the time that her morals didn't quite suit the surroundings, but Mortenson said they made allowances for sopranos.

So I consulted Azazel. He was quite willing to help; none of this nonsense, you know, of demanding my soul in exchange. I remember I once asked Azazel if he wanted my soul and he didn't even know what it was. He asked me what I meant and it turned out I didn't know what it was, either. It's just that he's such a little fellow in his own universe that it gives him a feeling of great success to be able to throw his weight around in our universe. He likes to help out.

He said he could manage three hours and Mortenson said that would be perfect when I gave him the news. We picked a night when she was going to be singing Bach or Handel or one of those old piano-bangers, and was going to have a long and impressive solo.

Mortenson went to the church that night and, of course, I went too. I felt responsible for what was going to happen and I thought I had better oversee the situation.

Mortenson said, gloomily, "I attended the rehearsals. She was just singing the same way she always did; you know, as though she had a tail and someone was stepping on it."

That wasn't the way he used to describe her voice. The music of the spheres, he said on a number of occasions, and it was all uphill from there. Of course, though, he had been thrown over, which does warp a man's judgment.

I fixed him with a censorious eye. "That's no way to talk of a woman you're trying to bestow a great gift upon."

"That's just it. I want her voice to be perfect. Really perfect. And I now see-now that the mists of love have cleared from my eyes-that she has a long way to go. Do you think your spirit can handle it?"

"The change isn't time to start till 8:15 P.M." A stab of suspicion went through me. "You hadn't been hoping to use up the perfection on the rehearsal and then disappoint the audience?"

"You have it all wrong," he said

They got started a little early and when she got up in her white dress to sing it was 8:14 by my old pocket watch which is never off by more than two seconds. She wasn't one of your peewee sopranos; she was built on a generous scale, leaving lots of room for the kind of resonance you need when you reach for that high note and drown out the orchestra. Whenever she drew in a few gallons of breath with

which to manipulate it all, I could see what Mortenson saw in her, allowing for several layers of textile material.

She started at her usual level and then at 8:15 precisely, it was as though another voice had been added. I saw her give a little jump as though she didn't believe what she heard, and one hand, which was held to her diaphragm, seemed to vibrate.

Her voice soared. It was as though she had become an organ in perfect pitch. Each note was perfect, a note invented freshly at that moment, besides which all other notes of the same pitch and quality were imperfect copies.

Each note hit squarely with just the proper vibrato, if that's the word, swelling or diminishing with enormous power and control.

And she got better with each note. The organist wasn't looking at the music, he was looking at her, and -- I can't swear to it -but I think he stopped playing. If he were playing, I wouldn't have heard him anyway. There was no way in which you could hear anything while she was singing. Anything else but her.

The look of surprise had vanished from her face, and there was a look of exaltation there instead. She had put down the music she had been holding; she didn't need it. Her voice was singing by itself and she didn't need to control or direct it. The conductor was rigid and everyone else in the chorus seemed dumbfounded.

The solo ended at last and the chorus sounded in what was a whisper, as though they were all ashamed of their voices and distressed to turn them loose in the same church on the same night.

For the rest of the program it was all her. When she sang, it was all that was heard even if every other voice was sounding. When she didn't sing, it was as though we were sitting in the dark, and we couldn't bear the absence of light.

And when it was over-well, you don't applaud in church, but they did then. Everyone in the church stood up as though they had been yanked to their feet by a single marionette string, and they applauded and applauded, and it was clear they would applaud all night unless she sang again.

She did sing again; her voice alone, with the organ whispering hesitantly in the background; with the spotlight on her; with no one else in the chorus visible.

Effortless. You have no idea how effortless it was. I wrenched my ears away from the sound to try to watch her breathing, to catch her taking in breath, to wonder how long a note could be held at full volume with only one pair of lungs to supply the air.

But it had to end and it was over. Even the applause was over. It was only then that I became aware that, next to me, Mortenson had been sitting with his eyes glittering, with his whole being absorbed in

her singing. It was only then that I began to gather what had happened.

I am, after all, as straight as a Euclidean line and have no deviousness in me, so I couldn't be expected to see what he was after. You, on the other hand, who are so crooked you can run up a spiral staircase without making any turns, can see at a glance what he was after.

She had sung perfectly-but she would never sing perfectly again.

It was as though she were blind from birth, and for just three hours could see-see all there was to see, all the colors and shapes and wonders that surround us all and that we pay no attention to because we're so used to it. Suppose you could see it all in its full glory for just three hours-and then be blind again!

You could stand your blindness if you knew nothing else. But to know something else briefly and then return to blindness? No one could stand that.

That woman has never sung again, of course. But that's only part of it. The real tragedy was to us, to the member of the audience.

We had perfect music for three hours, perfect music. Do you think we could ever again bear to listen to anything elss than that?

I've been as good as tone-deaf ever since. Recently, I went to one of those rock festivals that are so popular these days, just to test myself out. You won't believe me, but I couldn't make out one tune. It was all noise to me.

My only consolation is that Mortenson, who listened most eagerly and with the most concentration, is worse off than anyone in that audience. He wears earplugs at all times. He can't stand any sound above a whisper.

Serves him right!